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ABSTRACT

Analyses of sex differences in major life role conflicts suggest a qualitative difference between the family life of men and women, with an advantage for men. Differences between the sexes in ratings of satisfaction with family life were investigated using data taken from the 1977 Quality of Employment Survey. The analysis sample was restricted to parents from dual-earner families, in which the respondents all performed a variety of roles: work, marriage, parenthood, home maintenance, and leisure. The family experiences of men and women were distinguishable not by the number or configuration of roles enacted but by the relationships between these roles in conjunction with the amount of time invested in them. In particular, differences in the perceived quality of family life between husbands and wives were attributable to sex differences in the relationship between their family life roles and their leisure roles. Family roles tended to conflict with leisure roles among women, and tended to overlap with leisure roles among men. (Author)

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SEX DIFFERENCES IN THE EXPERIENCE OF FAMILY ROLES

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Sex Differences in the Experience of Family Roles

At last year's APA convention in New York, I reported to a symposium on an analysis of sex differences in conflicts among major life roles, specifically, conflicts among work, family roles, and leisure. I interpreted these results as suggesting a qualitative difference between the family life of men and women, a difference that gave the advantage to men. In my remarks today, I plan to summarize briefly the data from the earlier analysis and then report on a supplementary analysis that further explores sex differences in the experience of family life.

In the initial investigation, I proposed the notion of inferred conflict as one approach to studying conflict among roles. This approach called for the computation of bivariate relationships between the amount of time spent in one role (e.g., childcare) and the amount of time spent in another role (e.g., leisure). In general, we would expect that the time spent in two such roles should be negatively related (i.e., the more time spend in one role, the less time available for the other). The inferred conflict approach assumes that the stronger the negative bivariate relationship between the two time measures, the greater the level of conflict.

The data I reported last year came from the 1977 Quality of Employment Survey and were based on personal interviews with a national sample of approximately 1500 American workers; a worker being defined as anyone 16 years of age or older who worked for pay at least 20 hours per week. The data from the survey indicated a higher level of inferred conflict between family roles and leisure among women than among men. This pattern held for two different family roles, childcare and home chores. Specifically, the bivariate association

between amount of time spent in childcare and amount of leisure time was significantly positive for men both on workdays and on days off, but was significantly negative for women on workdays and not significant on days off. Moreover, for men the relationship between time spent on home chores and leisure time was significantly positive for workdays and not significant for days off; yet for women it was nonsignificant for workdays and significantly negative for days off. It is clear that the bivariate relationships involving time tend to be positive for men and negative for women.

These data not only provide evidence of a sex difference in the level of conflict between family and leisure roles, with women registering more conflict than men; they also point to an interesting anomaly, namely, positive relationships between the time men spend in family and leisure roles. At last year's symposium, I proposed that the concept of partial overlap of activities offers the best explanation of positive relationships between time spent in two roles: that is, when an appreciable number of activities qualify as belonging to two different roles, a positive association may emerge between the amounts of time allocated to the two roles. The notion of partial overlap applies in particular to the fact that the bivariate associations among time spent in family roles and leisure tend to be positive for men. Among men, there would appear to be some overlap of childcare activities and leisure, and likewise between home chores and leisure. Generally, leisure is thought of as more enjoyable than either childcare responsibilities or home chores. Thus the postulated overlap of family and leisure activities among men raises the possibility that the leisure of men (but not women) may include childcare activities and home chores. In short, the childcare activities and home chores of working men (but not working women) may be sufficiently enjoyable to be considered leisure; for women, however, family and leisure activities appear

to be distinct and, to some degree, in conflict with each other.

My second and more recent analysis of sex differences in the experience of family life adopts a more direct approach. Whereas the first analysis points to a qualitative difference in the family life of men and women based on the inference that men tend to define family life as part of their leisure and women do not, the second analysis examines sex differences in ratings of satisfaction with family life. Once again, I have taken the data from the 1977 Quality of Employment Survey but this time I have restricted the analysis sample to parents from two-earner families. I have excluded non-parents because they were not asked the question about satisfaction with family life; in addition, the exclusion of non-parents is consistent with this symposium's emphasis on people who enact multiple roles. I have further confined the analysis to married respondents with employed spouses for two distinct reasons. One is to eliminate as bases of sex differences in family life such gross factors as presence versus absence of a spouse and presence versus absence of a nonemployed spouse who can assume the bulk of family responsibilities. In short, the selection of dual-earner families as the basis of the analysis sample should tend to minimize sex differences in family life because these families display the greatest structural similarity between the roles enacted by husbands and wives. Thus, any differences between the family life of husbands and wives in two-earner families are likely to be attributable to factors that are more subtle and perhaps more interesting than those associated with other types of families. The second reason for selecting members of dual-earner families again concerns the theme of this symposium: all members of two-earner couples are simultaneously enacting multiple roles.

The data I will be reporting on sex differences in the experience of family life are based on the single item: "All in all, how satisfied would

you say you are with your family life? Extremely satisfied, very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, or not too satisfied." We would expect a measure of role satisfaction to be sensitive to the quantitative issue (viz., how much time is spent in the role) as well as to the qualitative dimension (viz., how much enjoyment or gratification is gained from the role). Accordingly, I have imposed a statistical control on the amount of time spent in two family roles, childcare and home chores, in an effort to isolate sex differences in the quality of family life. The measures of time spent in family roles are constructed as follows. Respondents were asked: "On the average, on days when you're working, about how much time do you spend (taking care of or) doing things with your child(ren)?" "And how much time on days when you're not working?" By using additional information available on the number of days the respondent worked each week, I was able to estimate the number of hours spent on childcare on a weekly basis. Respondents were also asked: "On the average, on days when you're working, about how much time do you spend on home chores—things like cooking, cleaning, repairs, shopping, yard work, and keeping track of money and bills?" "And about how much time on days when you're not working?" Again, an estimate was derived of the number of hours the respondent spent on home chores each week.

Regression procedures provide a convenient tool for examining sex differences in family satisfaction both before and after the statistical control on time spent in family roles. The analytic procedure is simply first to regress family satisfaction on sex in order to test for zero-order sex differences, then to regress family satisfaction on sex plus the two additional predictors, weekly time spent in childcare and weekly time spent in home chores. The statistical significance of sex as a predictor in the latter regression should indicate whether there is a qualitative difference in the family life of men

and women in dual-earner families because a control has been placed on sex differences in the amount of time spent in the two family roles.

Based on a total analysis sample of 275 respondents (with just slightly more men than women), the regression results fail to establish a significant zero-order difference between the family satisfaction of husbands and wives in dual-earner families; men do score higher on satisfaction than women but not significantly higher. Once measures of time in the two family roles are included as additional predictors in the regression equation, however, the effect of sex does attain statistical significance, with men registering significantly higher levels of family satisfaction than women. The most plausible explanation of why significant differences emerge only after controls are imposed on time in family roles concerns offsetting quantitative and qualitative effects at the zero-order level. That is, the quality of family life is indeed higher for men than for women in two-earner families but the men spend less time in family roles than do the women and the regressions indicate that less time in family roles tends to be associated with lower satisfaction with family life. At the zero-order level, then, the higher quality of family life for men is sufficiently offset by their reduced time involvement in family life that no resultant sex difference in satisfaction emerges. Once we control on amount of role time, it becomes clear that in two-earner couples the family life of men is qualitatively superior to that of women. These findings of mean sex differences in family satisfaction among dual-earner couples are of course consistent with the conclusions from the earlier analysis; namely, that family life and leisure tend to conflict with each other among women whereas family life takes on the characteristics of leisure among men.

A very pertinent next question is simply: "Why is the family life of men more enjoyable?" Available empirical studies suggest three factors in

particular. The first one has already been alluded to indirectly. It concerns differences between the types of activities in which men and women typically engage. In the case of childcare, for example, men tend to allow their wives to assume most of the demanding and less enjoyable responsibilities, so that the time they spend with their children is consequently viewed as recreational. Based on data from her large-scale study of urban households, Sarah Fenstermaker Berk (1979) notes a tendency for fathers' childcare activities to be primarily recreational.

A second reason why men in two-earner couples enjoy an advantage in family life is that fathers, at most, are expected to help with their children, whereas mothers typically have the much more demanding assignment of taking responsibility for them. Laura Lein's (1974) intensive investigation of 14 families in which both husband and wife worked suggested that although husbands share certain childcare duties with their wives, the responsibility for seeing that such tasks get done ultimately falls on the wives in most cases.

A third possible contributor to the observed sex differences in the quality of family life is that wives often have to perform two or more family activities simultaneously; husbands, by comparison, engage in only one activity at a time. A particularly likely combination for wives involves childcare activities and home chores. Laura Lein comments specifically on the sex difference in the simultaneity of childcare and home chores: "Unlike mothers who are trying to do other chores while watching their children, fathers' hours of childcare are more often devoted to childcare exclusively."

The foregoing data on the family experiences of parents in two-earner families speak directly to the notion of multiple role enactment. The respondents included in the second analysis all performed a variety of roles: work, marriage, parenthood, home maintenance, and leisure. What distinguished the

family experiences of men and women in these dual-earner couples was not the number or configuration of roles enacted but rather the relationships among these roles in conjunction with the amount of time invested in the roles. In particular, differences emerged between the quality of the family life of husbands and wives because the sexes differed in the relationship between their family life and their leisure. Family roles tended to conflict with leisure among women but to overlap with leisure among men.

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